

California's school funding woes slash adult ed

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One of the biggest casualties of the school funding crisis in California is adult education.

Consider some numbers:

- A couple of years ago, San Juan Unified had more than 12,000 enrolled in adult education courses. In December, San Juan trustees voted to eliminate all adult education programs to help bridge a \$30 million budget shortfall.
- In Sacramento City Unified, the drop in adult ed students has been steep. In February 2010, adults had taken 9,372 classes in the district since July. This year, the number dropped to 5,773.

The reason for adult ed's demise is clear, officials say.

For decades, a large portion of California's school funding was strictly designated in categories. In other words, adult education funding was required to be used for just that – providing adults with high school diploma classes and offering a wide range of classes from English as a second language to career classes such as auto mechanics, and health and safety classes, including restaurant food handling.

In 2009, those categorical restrictions were lifted for 40 programs, including adult education. That gave embattled school districts the ability to redirect a large chunk of money for other needs.

California school districts receive \$634 million annually in state funding for adult education programs, but more and more of those dollars are being used to educate kindergarten through 12th grade students.

In the first year that districts were given that flexibility, adult education enrollment statewide dropped 36 percent. Officials predict the decline will continue as additional school districts use that funding to fill gaping holes in their budgets.

"Adult education is taking a major hit across a variety of school districts statewide," said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at UC Berkeley. "It's hard to criticize school superintendents when they are asking the question, what is their core mission?"

Sacramento City Unified receives \$13.8 million in state and federal funding for adult education, in addition to \$3.6 million in other funding sources. On Thursday, the district's school board approved an additional \$3 million in new cuts on top of the \$4.4 million approved last year.

That \$7.4 million in adult ed funds will be swept into the district's general fund, which the district is predicting will have a \$22.3 million deficit for 2011-2012 if a statewide tax extension is not placed on the June ballot and passed by voters.

Should the tax extension pass, the district predicts a \$9.2 million deficit. In the meantime, the district approved \$28 million in cuts in case its "worst-case" scenario was too rosy.

Besides cuts to adult education, the district increased class sizes, nearly eliminated transportation, ended critical financial support for sports and clubs like yearbook and band, and asked all employees to take a 5 percent pay cut.

"When you are making such Draconian cuts you have to say: 'What is our focus?' It's K-12," said trustee Jeff Cuneo. "But, we are the flagship district in an urban environment. We should be able to give our community an opportunity to better themselves."

Cuneo said he originally sought to completely eliminate adult education to combat K-12 cuts. He said a visit to Fremont School for Adults helped change his mind.

"It impacts you when you see a room of English-language learners who are trying to be a contributing member of society," Cuneo said. "Still, we are making severe cuts to adult education."

The district will close Florin Technology Education Center and cut back classes in its remaining three adult schools. All 50 adult education teachers will receive pink slips this month, although not all of them will be laid off.

"We need more education, not less," said Rodrigo Lopez, who learned English while taking classes at Florin Tech and is working on his high school diploma. "We have parents who can't fill out applications so their children can get lunch. Now, we are going to cut classes even more?"

After San Juan Unified trustees eliminated adult education funding in December, the Alta California Regional Center stepped up with \$1.1 million to help Orange Grove Adult School for developmentally disabled adults remain open for another year.

Before adult education funding became flexible in 2008-09, San Juan Unified served 12,065 adult students. San Juan will continue to receive \$5.6 million in state funding previously reserved for adult education.

The funding flexibility that allowed districts to siphon adult ed money for other programs was originally scheduled to end in 2012-13, but Gov. Jerry Brown's new budget proposal extends it to 2014-2015.

"We probably have 10 districts that have completely done away with their adult education programs," said Debra Jones, an adult education administrator with the California Department of Education.

"Many are running a shoestring program. This year will be particularly tough. I anticipate enrollment will drop another 25 percent." "We have parents who can't fill out applications so their children can get lunch. Now, we are going to cut classes even more?"

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